

Bonaire's Leeward Leisure

Driven by a tourism economy based largely on scuba, Bonaire has become an island custom tailored to divers. Through a series of legislative acts between 1961 and 1979 (when the Bonaire Marine Park was established) Bonaire has worked hard to preserve its reef system and create a diver-friendly environment. This becomes obvious almost as soon as you leave the Flamingo Airport. With over 60 dive sites along the western coast alone, drive through air fill stations, calm waters and easy shore entry, the biggest challenge to diving Bonaire is knowing where to start. Once you've purchased your marine park tag (obtained at any dive shop for US \$25.00) you're free to book a dive boat or pick up tanks and enter the water right from shore. Labeled by brightly painted yellow rocks along the side of the coastal road and easy access, shore diving couldn't be much simpler. Boat diving along the leeward side is just as easy. Whether you're headed for a site close to shore or one off the small island of Klein Bonaire, the calm seas and short boat rides make for a virtually stress free experience.

From wrecks to reefs to beautifully colored coral encrusted piers, Bonaire has something to offer every dive enthusiast. The numerous dive sites lining the western side of the island are generally grouped into four areas: northern, southern, Washington Slagbaai Park, and Klein Bonaire. Driving south away from the yellow Dutch gable buildings of Kralendijk, visitors will enter the low, flat region of the island occupied by the expansive Solar Salt Works Company and home to countless pink flamingos. It is along this stretch that popular sites such as the double reefed Angel City, the colorfully encrusted pilings beneath Salt Pier, and the hulking wreck of the Hilma Hooker can be found. To the north of the city, the topography rises into the hills of Washington Slagbaai National Park. Access to sites in the park is generally limited to shore diving and requires the purchase of a park pass. Two of the island's favorite dive sites, Karpata and 1000 Steps are located just south of the park. With mountainous star corals, spectacular cross cutting channels, and submerged anchors, this area of Bonaire a must-see. The small island of Klein Bonaire sits west of Kralendijk and like the rest of Bonaire, is bordered by dive sites. Here, divers can see forests of black coral along the island's southwest corner.

And right in the city of Kralendijk beneath the Town Pier, divers will experience an impressive night dive, seeing everything from reef squid to frog fish to seahorses.

Indeed, Bonaire boasts an impressive number of dive sites. And recently, yet another has been added to the list. In August of 2003, the historic vessel, *Our Confidence* sank in 55 feet of water just 150 feet off the Harbour Village beach. Heeled over slightly to the starboard side, the wreck is still largely intact and can be viewed by snorkelers and divers alike. Her narrow wooden hull, planked pilothouse, deck railings, upright rigging, and open hatches create the ghostly scene of an antiquity frozen in time. The wreck is well marked and only a short swim from the Harbour Village Beach Club's shoreline.

With nearly unlimited access to sites from shore, divers should bring a pair of booties and strictly follow their dive tables or computers. And they should prepare to be spoiled, not only by the great underwater sites, but by the freedom to dive when and where they want as well.